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Contact: Kim Hunter Reed

LOUISIANA COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PROGRESS TIED TO RENEWAL OF TAXES

Efforts to continue the momentum in improving Louisiana's colleges and universities are in jeopardy unless state legislators approve the renewal of current taxes which are now under consideration at the State Capitol.

On Monday (May 20), the appropriations bill, after a series of amendments, was passed by the committee. The impact on Louisiana's colleges and universities is substantial.

"The successful implementation of our current reform initiatives is contingent on the financial viability of our colleges and universities. If they are placed in financial jeopardy, all recent progress is at risk," said Commissioner of Higher Education Joseph Savoie.

Currently, the campuses are focusing on improved academic excellence, higher admission standards and better student performance. Savoie says the end results will be higher graduation rates, greater student success and improved economic development.

"If campuses do not receive funding for the \$26 million in mandated cost increases for civil service merit pay and mandated increases in group health insurance premiums, the result will be a significant cut in their funding," Savoie said.

Funds to cover mandated civil service pay adjustments, a total of \$10.6 million, are dependent on the renewal of the current fourth penny of sales tax. In addition, funds to cover mandated increases in group health insurance premiums, \$15.8 million, are dependent on renewal of the current income tax limitation on excess itemized deductions.

Other education initiatives have also been reduced and are now dependent on passage of the fourth penny of the sales tax renewal. They include:

*All funding for the community and technical college system necessary to meet recent enrollment growth.

ADD ONE

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*Teacher quality improvement initiatives, and

*The Governor's Biotechnology Initiative, which is research-based and designed to spur economic development.

Commissioner Savoie summarized what is at stake as a result of the current budget situation.

"We have seen significant progress in our colleges and universities. Enrollment is up. Graduation rates are up. Student success rates are up and remedial education is down. The momentum for further improvements is growing. Now is not the time to abandon this progress. The state needs a strong and viable community college system, responsive technical college campuses and universities that serve students, their communities and, through targeted research, the economic development of the state and that takes stable resources and sustained effort. We will be working to protect our progress," said Savoie.

Further discussion on the fate of funding for postsecondary education will occur tomorrow at 9:00 a.m. during the Board of Regent's legislative committee meeting.